

Science for Environment Policy

Local food collectives: what role should public authorities take?

Local food systems, such as vegetable box schemes or farmers' markets, can encourage sustainable consumption. However, authorities must take care before becoming too involved in such citizen-led initiatives, because these collectives may be wary of government intervention, a new study suggests.

For a number of reasons, including concern over the way food is produced in modern [agriculture](#), local food systems (LFSs) have emerged in towns and cities across Europe. These organisations take many forms, but all try to ensure food is produced and consumed as locally as possible, using [sustainable production](#) practices and with fair prices for producers and consumers. LFSs are good examples of [environmental social innovation](#), i.e. citizen-led transitions to a more sustainable lifestyle or society.

This study explored the governance of LFSs, based on a case study of 'Food Teams'- groups of people who together buy fresh produce from local farmers who use sustainable agricultural methods. The researchers focused on three regions of Belgium: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, areas where food teams are becoming increasingly popular. In early 2014 there were over 160 Food Team initiatives participating in the Flemish *Voedselteams* network alone.

The researchers focused on the relationships between public authorities and the collectives that make up the Belgian Food Teams. They reviewed relevant scientific and regulatory data and documents, as well as internal Food Teams' documents, and interviewed representatives from local, regional, federal and European public authorities to explore policies that affect Food Teams. They also interviewed other stakeholders, such as farmers' trade union representatives, and environmental organisations. In all, 31 stakeholders were interviewed.

They found that there is no policy framework which directly supports the governance of LFSs in Belgium, unlike other environmental social innovations which are formally recognised by public authorities. They also identified some barriers to the development of LFSs; for example, food hygiene rules that are better suited to large industrial organisations in the food sector, but hamper small local initiatives. Nevertheless, there are some positive aspects to the relatively low government involvement, for example, the informal status of the Food Teams has allowed public authorities to apply some rules less strictly. For instance, the Food Teams can decide which farmers to buy from using their own criteria. Food Teams may also apply for subsidies from public authorities, or they can decide to operate free from government intervention.

The study also highlighted key differences across the three regions, especially with regard to the level of involvement with the authorities:

1. In Flanders, the Food Team system is well integrated into the policy regime: it is recognised as a socio-cultural movement and receives subsidies. Members directly engage with policymakers over food production and distribution issues.
2. In Brussels, the network of Food Teams also receives public subsidies. However, they are, to a certain extent, reluctant to become too embedded in the policy regime.
3. In Wallonia, there is no regional coordinating body or network, which means there is a wide variety of different Food Teams which have developed independently. Some individual Food Teams in this region rely partly on support from local authorities; however, the movement as a whole does not receive subsidies.

The researchers say that although there are clearly actions that public authorities can take to encourage these initiatives, these results also suggest that some Food Teams might fear they are losing their independence if governance is overly proactive. This could lead to the breakdown of the schemes, they warn.



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